



METHOD OF MONITORING MULTI-MEDIA COMMUNICATION BETWEEN PARTIES

5 FIELD OF THE INVENTION

The present invention relates to communication devices and specifically involves regulated Internet communication between one or more parties.

10 BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

By 2005, 44 million American children will surf the Internet regularly. This is a staggering number, and it gets larger every year. Unfortunately, every one of these 44 million children is a potential young victim for the many predators online. Daily newspapers around the country are constantly peppered with stories of adults who used the Internet to lure children to offline meetings. The results are always horrific. New pornography and adult-oriented Internet sites are launched every week, and many of these provide free, instant access without age verification. Essentially, for every opportunity a child has on the Internet, there is a potential danger. The only way to divert children from the perils of the Internet and ensure their safety is to provide them with the proper education, supervision and Internet outlets.

The requisite education and supervision would ideally be supplied by parents. However the number of single-parent and dual-income households are rising. Thus, many parents do not have the time or energy to properly educate 5 their children about the Internet. Of those who do, very few supervise and direct their child's activities for the duration of time the child is online.

Internet-wide regulations aimed at child safety could help compensate for the lack of parental supervision. 10 Unfortunately, it is unlikely that all branches of the government will agree on such extensive, far-reaching legislation in the near future. For example, in 1996, Congress approved the Communications Decency Act, which would have made it illegal to distribute obscene or 15 indecent material over the Internet. The Supreme Court overturned the Act, ruling that its language was too vague to comport with the First Amendment. A few years later, President Clinton assembled the Internet Online Summit, which brought together hundreds of media, education and 20 government leaders. After several months of debate, the group still had not reached consensus on how to make the entire Internet a safer place for children.

With parents indisposed and the government unsure

about what to do, it appears that the only way to truly protect children from the terrors of the Internet is to create a safe and secure place for them within it - a space where they can be educated, supervised and have 5 access to safe Internet outlets from underneath one electronic roof.

There are already a variety of Internet locations and software programs designed specifically to promote child safety. The sites usually include information such as 10 Internet safety tips, educational quizzes and tutoring chat rooms where students can receive help with homework. However, they are all deficient in at least one respect.

For example, Surf Swell Island, a website owned and 15 copyrighted by Disney, is designed to instruct children on how to navigate the Internet safely. This site comprises a variety of Internet safety activities for children, including an information tutorial and quizzes which test the child's understanding of Internet safety and proper 20 Internet conduct. Upon answering questions correctly, the child is awarded a digital "Internet Safety Certificate" which may serve as indication to parents that their children understand how to use the Internet responsibly.

This certificate, however, does not guarantee a child's safety on the Internet; many adult and hate web sites can be accidentally accessed through search engines despite the user's intended search. Additionally, this web site 5 does not provide children with the ability to have real-time correspondence with another child, and it cannot monitor a child's activities.

Existing tutoring locations also have their limitations. For example, America Online's tutoring rooms 10 limit a child to three questions. Children are also forced to exit the service after fifteen minutes, and cannot reenter for at least an hour. Thus, on America Online's service, children are unable to communicate for 15 extended periods of time with a guaranteed safe educational source. Additionally, these tutoring rooms are in the form of chat rooms with instant messaging capabilities. Therefore, it is possible that children on this service will be contacted by an unknown person with 20 harrowing intentions, even though they are only looking for help with homework. This major flaw in America Online's tutoring system emphasizes that an Internet-savvy child is not the only thing needed to create a safe Internet environment. Some level of supervision and the

ability to access only child-friendly sites is also necessary.

Filtering software programs such as Cyber Patrol™, Net Nanny™ and SmartFilter™ attempt to lessen the need for 5 constant supervision. These programs can be installed onto a computer and serve to monitor, warn, or block access to web sites containing material which has been deemed inappropriate by the installer. Similar controls have been incorporated into some web browsers, including 10 Microsoft Internet Explorer™ and Netscape Navigator™. These filtering software programs, however, require someone's active installation and their settings must be modified frequently, because standard program settings may restrict access to sites which are appropriate for 15 children and may not block out every inappropriate destination. Also, these digital filtering techniques do not provide children with an isolated interface within which they can communicate with another person who is guaranteed to be a safe resource.

20 Some Internet Service Providers include filtering technology that does not require installation and provides a more isolated interface intended for use in schools. Examples of these products include Bascom's Access

Management Engine (AME)[™], Symantec's I-Gear[™] and America Online's AOL@SCHOOL[™]. AME provides a "default allow list," selected by an Advisory Board, which allows a user to access only the sites specified in the list. I-Gear[™] provides Internet content filtering software for both corporate and home use with features specific to Internet Service Providers (ISP), and allows filtering to occur at the specific location of the ISP. AOL@SCHOOL[™] includes built in search filters and safety controls specific to each school's requirement. However, none of these products provide an interface which allows children to communicate directly with another child or an online mentor who can supervise them, where each person the child contacts is pre-approved and all contact is continuously screened and regulated for child safety by means of an off-site adult technician.

There are also several United States Patents which relate to tutoring and regulated communication designs. None of them approach the functionality of the present invention.

For example, Anupam et al. U.S. Patent No. 5,862,330 discloses a technique for collaborative browsing on the Internet wherein two users exchange information with one

user's browser connecting to the other user's browser and controlling the view of the other. However, Anupam does not disclose communication means outside of the function of web browsing of HTML documents. Thus, Anupam does not 5 provide a means to communicate through messaging, sharing files and collaborating with other programs while each user is connected to the Internet, nor does Anupam provide safety means of an off-site adult technician who monitors a user's activity and guides the user on the world wide web. 10

Sonnenreich U.S. Patent No. 5,974,446 discloses a distance learning system for communicating between servers and clients. Sonnenreich teaches distant learning comprising online classes, text-based chat, email 15 messaging and online presentations wherein a central virtual common room for system sharing comprises personal user identification information and user authentication. However, Sonnenreich does not provide one-to-one communication with dual shared access. Additionally, 20 Sonnenreich does not disclose the idea of an offsite personal adult web browsing guide.

Bell et al. U.S. Patent No. 6,014,134 discloses a network-based software tutoring application. Bell teaches

of a virtual tutor which can be used as an interface for a user to receive answers to various questions wherein the response is generated by a database of information. Bell does not disclose tutoring or other communication means 5 for person-to-person contact through the Internet.

Thus, there exists the need for an Internet environment that educates, supervises and offers a wealth of safe Internet resources for children. There exists a need for Internet communication means wherein children can 10 browse the Internet with a personal off-site adult technical guide, or where children can communicate with each other on the Internet in a safe interface with the ability to interact in ways such as messaging, web browsing, file sharing and other media collaboration. The 15 present invention makes this possible.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

The present invention provides an improved means and method of communication through the use of the Internet.

20 This invention comprises an interface accessible by a user to log into a primary safe room with additional branch rooms, wherein each branch room comprises a unique activity. These activities may include, but are not

limited to, games, arts and crafts, reading, homework help and a buddy connection. Each room is monitored by an adult technician to ensure proper behavior and child safety so that a child can participate in these rooms

5 without the danger of viewing inappropriate material or receiving contact from a potentially dangerous adult disguised as a child. Furthermore, a buddy connection may comprise the linking of a user, typically a child, to an adult "buddy"/technician who serves as an aid to the user for accessing the world wide web in a capacity similar to an "electronic babysitter." In this buddy connection, both the user and the "buddy"/technician browse the web together, with the technician being a monitor that will only allow viewing of appropriate material on the user's screen in accordance with the user's profile details such as age or other factors established by a child's parents.

10 Furthermore, such a buddy connection may comprise a graphical interface and communication means wherein a child may communicate more comfortably on the world wide web without being required to type on a keyboard or speak on the phone. Additionally, a separate set of branch rooms may be provided for adults for rooms such as scheduling buddy appointments for their child, customer

service and profile and customized setting information.

Therefore, it is an object of the present invention to provide interface means for a child to safely access information via the Internet.

5 It is also an object of the present invention to provide interface means for a child to safely communicate with other children through a variety of media forms.

Furthermore, it is an object of the present invention to provide an interface for a child to have safe access to a variety of individual activities such as games, art and reading.

Still further, it is an object of the present invention to provide linking means wherein the user is guided and monitored by an off-site technician to explore 15 the Internet.

Additionally, it is an object of the present invention to provide configuration means wherein a parent or guardian may set up appointments for their child to browse the Internet with a "buddy" technician, adjust personal 20 settings as to what type of content their child may be given access to, and receive customer service and billing information regarding their account with the service.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

A further understanding of the present invention can be obtained by reference to a preferred embodiment set forth in the illustrations of the accompanying drawings.

5 Although the illustrated embodiment is merely exemplary of systems for carrying out the present invention, both the organization and method of operation of the invention, in general, together with further objectives and advantages thereof, may be more easily understood by reference to the drawings and the following description. The drawings are not intended to limit the scope of this invention, which is set forth with particularity in the claims as appended or as subsequently amended, but merely to clarify and exemplify the invention.

15 For a more complete understanding of the present invention, reference is now made to the following drawings in which:

Figure 1 (FIG. 1) depicts a general organizational layout of the room structure of an embodiment according to 20 the present invention.

Figures 2A-2C (FIGs. 2A-2C) depict screens which may be viewed by the user during the log on process.

Figures 3A-3D (FIGs. 3A-3D) depict screens which may

be viewed by the user upon logging on to the home page.

Figures 4A-4C (FIGs. 4A-4C) depict screens which may be viewed by the user for entering a buddy link page.

Figure 5 (FIG. 5) depicts a buddy communication screen 5 of the present invention with art features.

Figure 6 (FIG. 6) depicts buddy monitor screens.

Figure 7 (FIG. 7) depicts a reading room screen.

Figure 8 (FIG. 8) depicts an art activity room screen.

Figure 9 (FIG. 9) depicts an art gallery page.

Figure 10 (FIG. 10) depicts a homework help screen.

Figure 11 (FIG. 11) depicts an adult's account information page.

Figure 12 (FIG. 12) depicts an adult's news update page.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

As required, a detailed illustrative embodiment of the present invention is disclosed herein. However, techniques, systems and operating structures in accordance 20 with the present invention may be embodied in a wide variety of forms and modes, some of which may be quite different from those in the disclosed embodiment. Consequently, the specific structural and functional

details disclosed herein are merely representative, yet in that regard, they are deemed to afford the best embodiment for purposes of disclosure and to provide a basis for the claims herein which define the scope of the present 5 invention. The following presents a detailed description of a preferred embodiment (as well as some alternative embodiments) of the present invention.

The present invention could embody itself as a software program which can be installed in a user's 10 Internet-accessible computer. This program may allow a parent to establish settings through the use of parental passwords or controls wherein a child may only access a safe interface. This safe interface is connected via Internet means to a host which is monitored by one or more 15 off-site adult technicians. These adult technicians work to continuously screen and monitor a child's activities to function as a human filter to provide a safe Internet experience for the child.

Upon logging onto the interface, a child enters a safe 20 room with the option to choose from a variety of activities. Each of these activities may be monitored by an adult technician as a filtering method or may be isolated from all Internet activity unrelated to the

particular activity to provide a safe activity room for a child.

Referring first to FIG. 1, shown is a layout of possible menu selections upon first entering a common room after login 100 to the safe interface of the present invention. The user views a Welcome Page 101 upon entering the common room and then can chose an Activity 102, Homework Help 103, an Appointment 104, an Upcoming Event 107 or an Adults 108 page. The first two categories, Activity 102 and Homework 103 are further divided by specific types of activities 105 and subjects for homework 106 which may in turn be further divided. Appointment 104 page may further branch off to a Buddy Pick-Up Weblne Connection 111 which may still further branch off to an Explore the Web Together Page 112. Adults Page 108 branches off to a Make an Appointment 109 and Customer Service 110 page, where the adult may make adjustments to various account information. The Upcoming Events 108 may be further divided into other user events 113.

Referring next to FIGs. 2A-2B, shown in FIG. 2A is a log on menu 200 which appears when a user chooses to log on to the interactive service of the present invention.

The user must select his or her screen name 201 and enter the correct password 202. Upon entering screen name 201 and password 202, the user must click the Sign On 203 button. Alternatively, for assistance, the user may press 5 the help button 204. A flash graphic such as the one exemplified in windows 1-5 in FIG. 2B may be displayed on the user's monitor to notify them of their connection status. A log on method such as this also provides the technician(s) with notification of who is logged on at any 10 given time.

FIGS. 3A-3C show screens viewed by the user upon successfully logging onto the service. FIG. 3A displays an entrance page 300 which, upon clicking 301, leads to the opening of the page 302 exemplified in FIG. 3B. Upon 15 entering the home page 302, links to Activities 303, Homework Help 304, Upcoming Events 305, Buddy Link-Up 306 and Adults 307 appears. For example, upon choosing the Buddy Link-Up 306, the screen changes pages 308 exemplified in FIG. 3C. A pull down menu appears wherein 20 the user may chose from Link-Up Now 310 or Make An Appointment 311 options.

Referring next to FIGs. 4A-4B, shown are screens displayed during the Buddy-Link login process. Upon

choosing the Link-Up Now option 310 in FIG. 3C, the home page retreats to the upper right hand corner for navigation control while at the same time the service company name transforms into a different color and changes 5 to the words "Buddy Link" as shown in FIG. 4A. The user then enters a Buddy Name 401 to link with, the user's own Screen Name 402 and password 403 and then selects the Link-Up button 404. Alternatively, for assistance, the user may press the help button 405. While the connection 10 is being made with the selected buddy, a flash graphic appears which informs the user that the connection is taking place. Examples of individual frames of this flash graphic are shown in windows 1-5 in FIG. 4B.

Upon successful log on to the Buddy Link, a child is 15 able to browse the Internet for educational or entertainment purposes wherein each page a child chooses to browse is first screened by the adult technician/buddy. In this fashion, all content viewed by a child may be deemed safe by an adult technician/buddy. Additionally, 20 this adult technician/buddy can assist the child in their Internet experience by recommending various web sites for certain material of interest to the child as well as answer questions the child may have about particular

technical issues or general material related to content viewed on the Internet. An additional window for child/buddy text chat may be provided to assist in child/buddy communication and/or communication may be enhanced through the use of microphone, speakers, and any related audio software.

During the buddy link connection, the user can communicate with the buddy by either typing or drawing or via telephone. Additional windows may be opened for viewing other sites, such as sites within the service's web site listing or other web sites. FIG. 5 depicting an example of one such communication window 500, wherein the user may use graphical means 501 of communicating with their buddy. Graphical means 501 comprises text elements 504, drawing element 502 and tool box 503. Using toolbox 503, the user may choose what tool to use in graphical means 501. Upon choosing a text-based tool from toolbox 503, the user can create or modify text elements 504 and upon choosing a graphically based tool from toolbox 503 a user may create or modify drawing element 502. At any time during the creation process of graphical means 501, the user can send the current display information of graphical means 501 to another user using a similar

communication window 500 or other device by clicking send button 504.

The service of the present invention may also be used for the exchanging of various files wherein the user may receive (download) or send (upload) files from the service. Such files may include various art templates, for example, from the art activities room. By using these art templates, the user may be provided with a modern day or online coloring book.

Referring next to FIG. 6, shown are Buddy Monitors 600. These windows inform a user who the buddy/monitor on-duty is for the particular room the user is in. When the user enters another room the buddy information will change. A "buddy", each with a buddy picture 601, is assigned to each room to answer questions the user/child may have and to monitor any information exchanges. Such buddy monitoring provides the safety feature of looking out for the welfare of the users/children on the site. To use the Buddy Monitor 600 function, a user types in his/her buddy name in the buddy name box 602 and types his/her ID number in ID number box 603. The user is then able to view the current Buddy on-duty's buddy monitor 601 with buddy name box 602 and ID number box 603 completed

with the buddy's name and ID number. The user can then decide to communicate to the buddy by typing in the Talk to Buddy box 604. The buddy can answer the user's questions and comments by typing in the buddy's Talk to Buddy box 604. The user can view both the text typed by the user and the text typed by the buddy in his/her own Talk to Buddy box 604. A further contemplation of the Talk to Buddy box 604 may comprise the option of the user's talk to buddy box 604 displaying the user's text upon the user typing text, sending the text over to the buddy's Talk to Buddy box 604 upon pressing a key such as the return key and then disappearing from the user's Talk to Buddy box 604. Furthermore, the user's Talk to Buddy box 604 may display the text typed by the buddy following the buddy's pressing a key such as the return key. Additional features which relate to this type of Buddy Monitor 600 may be added [*** suggested text stating similar?]

FIG. 7 shows a Reading Room Page 700. Such a page features a book of the month 701, wherein a child can obtain information about the story 702, the author 703, the characters 704 and Kid Comments 705, which details what other users/children thought of the book.

Approximately once a week a buddy links to this room to discuss the book. From this page, the child can link to past books of the month.

FIG. 8 shows an Art Activity Page 800. This page gives directions 801 on how to complete a specific art project. Once per week, at a specific time, a buddy will log on to this page and perform the art activity, step by step, with any users/children logged on at the time.

A screen within this Art Activity Page or other pages, and in particular the Buddy Page, may be configured with one or more software programs, including the commonly available Microsoft Paint program, supplied by either a user's computer or the host service (twoXplore™) to allow a user to communicate graphically with another user or an adult guide. Additionally, a user may be able to save their pages as files on their own computer and may also be able to share these files or other files with other users, with the approval of an approved buddy or adult technical guide.

FIG. 9 shows an Art Gallery Page 900. One feature found on this page is the Picture of the Month 901, wherein a user/child can view other user's art work 902, vote on a favorite for the next month 903, submit their

own work 904 and transfer files for sharing with a friend 905.

FIG. 10 shows a Homework Help Page 1000 which provides links to homework help in a specific subject such as 5 English 1001, Math 1002, Science 1003, Art 1004, History 1005, etc. The links provide children with resources to help them solve their homework problems or assist in other child educational activities.

FIG. 11 shows an Adults Page 1100 used to inform 10 parents of the tools provided by the service company, in this case twoXplore™. Parents can sign up for user services, make an appointment and link up with customer service through this page. The top left hand corner of the page contains rollovers, one side imagery, one side 15 type, linking an adult to the features or news updates at the time.

FIG. 12 shows a News Update Page 1200 which informs parents of the latest changes, events, etc 1201. concerning the service company, in this case twoXplore™.

20 While the present invention has been described with reference to one or more preferred embodiments, which embodiments have been set forth in considerable detail for the purposes of making a complete disclosure of the

invention, such embodiments are merely exemplary and are not intended to be limiting or represent an exhaustive enumeration of all aspects of the invention. The scope of the invention, therefore, shall be defined solely by the 5 following claims. Further, it will be apparent to those of skill in the art that numerous changes may be made in such details without departing from the spirit and the principles of the invention.